

## VIDEO REVIEWS

# Ithaca Video Festival

by Deirdre Boyle



For five years the Ithaca Video Festival has presented a stimulating selection of video art and documentary tapes. This year the four-hour program of 20 works was curiously disappointing. It's difficult to say whether it was because of the conspicuous absence of social documentaries. Previously they have created a structure for appreciating the more experimental art tapes. Or, perhaps it was simply the quality of the works selected by judges Pat Faust, Ann Volkes, Gunilla and Phillip Mallory Jones.

But, there was no disappointment in *Chott el-Djerid*, Bill Viola's magical exploration of electronic Impressionism and djinn-like illusions. Viola plays with light and the diffractions created by extreme heat and cold in silent landscapes of the Sahara, Saskatchewan, and central Illinois. His series of arctic and desert mirages evoke the subtle tones of Monet canvases: pristine, opalescent skies mirrored in stark, snowy landscapes; voluptuous, liquid colors — violet, apricot, rose, lemon — shimmering in pools of desert light.

Like the 19th century Impressionists, Viola explores the natural illusionism afforded by light, but he is also intrigued by the preception of abstract and concrete realities and the narrow margin dividing them. What at first appear to be pure color compositions slowly metamorphose into concrete objects: two undulating lavender lights are gradually revealed as two motorcycles traveling down a desert road. A wavy black dot on the pale horizon moves slowly toward the viewer: a man trudging hip-deep in snow, haloed in twin bands of light. Heat and light animate the inanimate and abstract the concrete, forming lovely, sensuous frames of pulsating, infinitely compelling, mysterious reality.

*Bound Feet, A Performance by Winston Tong* is also about illusions, but of a different sort. Tong and collaborator Tom Freebairn create the feeling of the past by switching between the vivid present of videotape to the flickering "silent move" past of film, inviting yet finally barring the viewer from participation in a painful legacy.

Tong is dressed as a woman with whitened face and wistful expression. He sets down a small bowl of water, then deliberately washes and powders a long, gracefully-arched foot as we hear a poignant dialogue in Chinese between a

mother and daughter. Their cheerful banter shifts abruptly as the slender foot is tightly bound: the child cries out, remonstrating, but the mother is firmly, piteously insistent. A screen is placed, then withdrawn to reveal both feet bound and standing in tiny, pointed red shoes. To the plaintive melody of Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies*, Tong begins to walk, falters, falls. Kneeling, he unrolls a black cloth with two naked dolls, one male, the other female. The dolls are deftly manipulated into erotic play: the woman's stunted red feet arouse the male; he in turn strokes them to arouse her. Discreetly, Tong folds the dark cloth, tumbling the figures suggestively into darkness, and then pulls a black veil over his face. He is last seen seated with his back to us as a young woman reaches up and holds her hand over the camera lens.

Tong's haunting impersonation of a woman presents an effectively ironic reversal of sexual roles and is the source of the tape's foreboding beauty. The erotic aspects of foot binding are brilliantly conveyed by the unusual puppetry, with its supple, lifelike movements and sleight-of-hand illusionism. Freebairn's side-lighting and smooth edits match Tong's performance, subtlety for subtlety.

Not all puppetry calls up admiration. In *Jazz Dance*, Doris Chase manipulates a dancer's image until she is rendered anonymous, a puppet whose every movement is subject to Chase's video synthesized redefinition. This manipulation is characteristic of Chase's video dance works, where performers as dissimilar in style and body as Kei Takei, Sarah Rudner, and Gay Delache all blur together in the service of a mechanistic art. Delache, the dancer in *Jazz Dance*, is more dehumanized than most: she could be a computer-generated form, so little sensual reality is conveyed by the slo-mo disc abstraction of her movements. Chase apparently is not interested in collaboration between dancer and video artist; she insists on having ultimate control. If she served the dancer and the dance as well as her own video wizardry, she might be able to lay claim to developing "original choreography." As it is, this is only video synthesis, and repetitive at that.

To find choreography for the video camera, one need only look at *Advance Riding Bowl* by Alan

### Sixth Annual Ithaca Video Festival Tapes

*The Breakfast Table*,

Anita Thacher  
*At the Dump*, Mimi Martin

*The Laughing*

*Alligator*, Juan Downey

*Electronic Masks*  $\oplus$

*By the Crimson Band of Cyttarak*, Barbara Sykes and Tom Defanti

*As a Public Service*, Collectivision

*Bad*, Steina

*Advance Riding Bowl*,

Alan Powell and Connie Coleman.

*Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, Bill Viola

*Jazz Dance*, Doris Chase

*Shutter I*  $\oplus$  *II*, Kathryn Kanehiro

# ITHACA VIDEO

ARTISTS

3rd Annual Ithaca Video Festival

6TH ANNUAL  
ITHACA VIDEO  
FESTIVAL

The FIFTH  
ANNUAL  
ITHACA VIDEO  
FESTIVAL

# 2ND annual ithaca video festival

Artists!

Powell and Connie Coleman. This is a lyric tribute to the skateboarder's skill as demonstrated by a group of handsome black teenage boys at a home-made track in North Philadelphia. Electronic edits loop their graceful movements, repeating or holding a rider suspended in space and time, silhouetted against the sky, defying gravity, then tumbling out of sight. The electronic edits choreograph their movements into a video dance of elegant twists, turns, and jumps.

Equally lyric in approach is Bill Charette's *Mixed Bag*, a sampler of four fillers produced for WGBH local news. Each is roughly two minutes in length and presents Charette's whimsical style and accomplished camera work and editing. *Happy Feet* is a brief series of interviews — recorded at ground level — of people roller-skating, running, jogging, walking a dog, bicycling, and so forth. *Sub Shop* captures the frantic pace of a fast food joint in lunchtime action, a prole version of *French Lunch*. *Apples* is a paean to autumn; it shows the toothy, juicy grins of young and old as they sink their teeth into succulent red globes in a sun-shot orchard. The last, *Pumpkin*, reveals the transformation of a large orange squash into a goulash jack-o'-lantern. Visual surprises of inside shots of the pumpkin being cut out are matched by the soundtrack's light-hearted humming which turns into the portentous organ swell of Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*. Shaped by filmic and television conventions, Charette's art is also distinctively personal — a pleasing blend of wit, poetry, and visual intoxication.

Barbara Sykes and Mimi Martin both work with computer-processed video images. Martin's delicately-colored images of garbage in *At the*

*Dump* are appealing, with their soft pinks, oranges, golds, pale blues, and fleshtones. The contemporary score of car sounds, tinkling glass, and eerie whale-like blasts intensifies the surreal atmosphere. Yet somehow, even at a mere two minutes in length, the work seems overlong, unable to engage the viewer's deepest attention by failing to provide a path to meanings beneath the visual surface.

Sykes' *Electronic Masks* is a computer-animated manipulation of boldly colorful masks that resemble Mayan stone sculptures. The slow distortion of one mask is succeeded by a rapid, rhythmic montage of different masks. Since this montage is so much more interesting than the slow, seemingly endless squeezing and pulling of the first, one wonders why Sykes left the opening so long, testing the viewer's threshold for boredom.

A quite different Indian mask greets the viewer in Juan Downey's *The Laughing Alligator*. This has been a work-in-progress for two years. In 1978 Downey first edited two short tapes, *The Laughing Alligator* and *The Singing Mute*, merged and reedited to form this new, half-hour tape. Downey has often recycled his images; he inserts sections of past works into newer ones as self-reflexive allusions. Here the hallmarks of his work — freshness of vision, lush romantic lyricism, and visual exuberance — have vanished, unexpectedly replaced by a dry, listless narrative push.

The search for his roots led the Chilean artist to live for several months among the Yanomami Indians of Brazil. Downey learned their language, lived in their culture, and probed the mysteries of their shamanistic rites and the use of

*Bound Feet, A Performance by Winston Tong, Tom Freebairn and Winston Tong*

*Apple(s), Peer Bode California I, Barbara Wright, Gordon C. A. Craig, Martha Olsen, Lewis MacAdams*

*Instant This - Instant That, Ellen Kahn and Linda Kahn Bikers' Wedding, Lyn Tiefenbacher and Dave Pentecost*

*Mixed Bag, Bill Charette*

*Water, Wind and the Record of the Rocks, Laurie McDonald Exquisite Corpse, Ernest Gusella Tapes, Pier Marton*

hallucinogenic drugs. The power of that experience, so strong in the tapes edited on his return, seems to have waned in this latest reworking.

In those early versions, Downey mocked the language and "objectivity" of anthropologists, who "cannibalize" the cannibals. Now he cannibalizes his own images of them, and he substitutes words like "excrement" for "shit," retranslating the Indian dialogues to fit new meanings. Such revisions cast doubt on his reliability as a translator of this culture and on the integrity of his own experience. Has the corruption of Western culture — loathed by Downey — infiltrated his own work? One notes that this new tape fits a conventional half-hour time slot and is careful not to offend the ears or sensibilities of certain viewers. In all, *The Laughing Alligator* is unhappily a watered-down, lifeless imitation of Downey's once moving and inspiring work.

Lifelessness is the very subject of *Instant This-Instant That*, Ellen and Linda Kahn's satire on a plastic, disposable culture. A day in the life of Nancy and Susie Twinart follows them from a breakfast of pop-tarts and Tang, to a toilette of spray deodorant, liquid mascara, and electric hair curlers, on to TV dinners, spam, spray starch, and bed. The driving rhythm of the title song by Taste Test carries us along to the predictable ending, a mirror image of the opening. The studied banality of the images is matched and reinforced by the rapid, regular pace of the edits. Amused at first by the visual glibness, one is finally left in doubt. The painted-on smiles and robot manner of the twins never takes on any edge, never invites the viewer to complicity with the satirists. A broad wink would be way out of line, yet some tipping of their hand seems necessary. Without it, the viewer is left vaguely uncertain whether the Kahns are really satirists or charter members of the bizarre culture they portray.

Few video artists have chosen to explore the comic on tape. Anita Thacher's *The Breakfast Table* is a witty idea in a charming, cartoon setting; regrettably, it falls flat. Leaden performances by Karen Wheeden as an unappreciated '40s housewife and Jeffrey Tambor Sal as her insensitive mate don't help things along. The melodrama opens with Wheeden dutifully preparing hubby's morning meal, unable to engage him in mere eye contact. So she fantasizes herself into various roles that might catch his notice — from the grey-haired harridan she feels herself to be into a steamy temptress à la Dietrich, from a loose-limbed, gum-chewing baseball pitcher to a booming Brunhilde, and finally, to an erotic nymph floating in a bubble bath. The climax occurs when hubby, oblivious to her various Walter Mitty incarnations, removes his glasses, flicks the brim of his hat, and transforms himself into a Latin lover. He snatches her into his arms to a tango beat and plants a languorous, libidinous kiss on her eager, surprised lips. They untangle, covered in flowers, and part on the musical exit of "Falling in Love Again." Although the scenario reads humorously, the plodding direction, flaccid editing, and awkward use of the one-camera set-up undermine the effort. Thacher, whose surreal films are exquisite masterpieces, has yet to hit her stride in video. Given the fertile imagination and talent clearly in evidence here, one hopes she will strike it soon.

The 6th Annual Ithaca Video Festival is currently touring museums, media arts centers, and libraries across the country. For more information about the tapes and the circuit, contact: Philip Mallory Jones, Ithaca Video Projects, 328 E. State St., Ithaca, NY 14850.